

Sub 275

**A submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the adequacy  
of Regional Radio in Australia**

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From 1982 to 2000 I was involved with the commercial radio industry. From 1982 to 1987 I was a volunteer helper at Adelaide station SAFM's "Community Switchboard", from 1987 to 2000 I was an announcer at various NSW regional stations.

From 1989 to 2000 I worked at what is now DMG Regional Radio's Wagga Wagga outlet – 2WG and StarFM. During my 10½ years at this company I worked as an announcer on both stations and at various times I filled the positions of promotions director, commercial producer, music director and programme director. I believe this gives me enough experience and credibility to comment on the current state of affairs.

In early 2000 DMG Wagga announced (to it's staff) that much of it's programming would soon be provided by the "Hub" facility at Albury. At that time, myself, along with other members of staff would be made redundant. Shortly afterwards a front page story in the Wagga Wagga Daily Advertiser highlighted this, and shortly thereafter I was informed that management had reconsidered and my job was now to remain.

I believe then, as I believe now, that my position was only retained due to the adverse publicity DMG attracted at that time.

Soon after the "Hub" came online, I resigned from the company and I now work in the television industry. I also work occasionally for ABC Radio Riverina.

I had originally intended to make this submission a highly comprehensive discussion on what had happened to Wagga Wagga radio over the past few years, however it has already been put into words, in the submission by Mr Richard Mutton of Dubbo.

If one were to take Mr Mutton's submission, change the word Dubbo to Wagga Wagga, and replace the names of the stations with those in the Wagga area you have an almost exact account of what has happened here. With one notable difference: Wagga Wagga does not as yet have a second commercial operator in the market.

I share Mr Mutton's lament into the reduction of localism in the service offered by the incumbent commercial operator. Here in Wagga Wagga, since the purchase by DMG, 2WG and StarFM have gone from being a fiercely local and proud independent operator, with live and local program announcements, to a mostly networked, slick sounding clone of a capital city broadcaster. And with the exception of the breakfast programs – which continue to be locally produced – very little local content is included in either station's output.

One comment was made at a public Inquiry that "regional radio sounds slicker than it has ever done – but it's doubtful whether it's better than it's ever been". This is so true.

I notice in passing that DMG's new Sydney station Nova96.9, contains NO networking, and according to station management as reported in the newspapers, is not likely to. I ask why not? Why not provide the Sydney program from Albury perhaps? Are DMG saying that Sydney people are clever enough to detect pseudo-localism but country people are too stupid to notice?

DMG can, and do, argue that localism has not been lost from their stations. I submit that prior to the current ownership, 2WG broadcast locally from 5:30am to midnight weekdays and from 6am to 6pm weekends.

The figure today: 5:30am to 2pm weekdays (with John Laws from 9am to 11am) and 6am to midday weekends.

In the remaining hours a networked program is supplied by DMG's Albury "Hub". The Hub allows the presenter to pre-record program pieces which are replayed in one specific market. So, in the main, the program is generic and if you were able to listen to different DMG stations at the same time, you would hear exactly the same announcer comments most of the time. However, there are certain times of the program where you will hear a program piece which relates to the market in which you are listening from.

The trouble is, there are very few of these localised pieces and with good reason. The announcer has to pre-record a piece for each market in which the Hub is being relayed to. Despite DMG's best intentions – the announcers are just not able to make these localised pieces frequent enough or meaningful enough.

I recently taped 2WG for 4 hours one afternoon. In that time I counted 4 lots of hourly weather, and a total of 2 localised program pieces over the whole 4 hours.

This is the heart of the argument that is being raised by myself and so many others in our condemnation of DMG's current programming. 2 localised program pieces in a 4 hour radio program is NOT local radio. An announcer who lives in Albury cannot, with any confidence, discuss local issues, local politics, local road conditions and local weather, all topics of great importance to regional listeners.

2 pieces of anecdotal evidence from the past 7 days:

1: Last Friday I chatted with one of the local postmen who was keen to discuss why his favourite station didn't seem to mention Wagga Wagga any more. He wasn't aware of what had happened behind the scenes but he told me that his colleagues had only recently been discussing the lack of localism on StarFM. "Cheerios" to local people. Discussions of local events and so on.

Small things – but things that give a station local credibility.

2: My office supervisor called me into her office last week to ask me whether the person on air at the time was in Wagga or at the Hub. I replied "The Hub" and asked "why?" She informed me that he had been talking about a community meeting that had been held in Wagga Wagga the previous evening. Intimating that he had been at that meeting, when quite obviously he hadn't. My colleague was highly offended at this piece of pretend-localism.

Country people DO notice!

To see just how informed the Hub are on local matters I only have to refer you to the fact that one of the Hub announcers has, as recently as 4 or 5 weeks ago, referred to myself on air. I have been gone from the company for over 8 months and this person thinks I still work there! I even have recent email from this person asking me why we (2WG) don't send them enough local information to help them (the Hub) keep up the appearance of localism during networked programs.

To refer back to Mr Mutton's submission: I understand Mr Mutton's frustrations into the quality of the service offered by the second operator in Dubbo.

I would dearly love to see a second commercial operator in the Wagga Wagga market, but I would ask that the Inquiry make recommendations as to the conditions attached to the licence, if one is issued, to force the operators to provide a truly local service. It would be a shame if a second operator appeared only to offer the same sort of service that already exists.

I must here declare my interest. I am a member of Riverina Radio Group. We are an aspirant for a new commercial license in Wagga Wagga. My fellows in

the Group have already made submissions to this Inquiry, and are intending to make personal submissions.

Let me also put on the record that we are the group that Mr Paul Thompson of DMG has described to the Inquiry as "relentless in their attacks upon DMG in Wagga". This "relentless attack" has consisted of:

- Making submissions to this Inquiry
- Making submissions to the ABA's Licence Area Draft Plans
- Issuing ONE petition asking for signatures of support for a 2<sup>nd</sup> commercial licence operator
- Letters and visits to politicians and councillors asking for their support
- Canvassing business operators for their likely support.
- Providing interviews to local media upon request.

Hardly relentless!

Mr Thompson also told the Inquiry that he believed Austereo were behind our campaign.

Perhaps we should be flattered that Mr Thompson associates us with his former company. However, for the record: We are not in any way connected with Austereo or with any other radio company.

We are, quite simply, a group of people who believe that DMG Regional Radio is not serving the community of the Riverina as well as it could or should. We believe that we can do better. And we would like the opportunity to prove it, by obtaining a commercial radio licence for the Riverina area.

The commercial radio industry is the only business that I can think of where you need government permission to start up. The only business where in many cases the incumbent has a protected monopoly. And yet when the incumbent changes it's business dramatically, as DMG has done in so many areas around Australia, there is no recourse for anyone else who believes they can do a better job.

May I point out that DMG seem to be quite happy for 2<sup>nd</sup> operators to obtain licences in towns and cities where they are NOT the incumbent. That is, where DMG themselves become the new operator. (Dubbo, Mildura etc.) So I ask, why do they have such a problem when threatened with competition in a region where they are the incumbent, sole operator? I notice that in their submissions to the ABA's license planning department, DMG issued almost identical submissions as to why **they** should remain the sole commercial operator in any particular area.

Surely DMG aren't afraid to let market forces decide the outcome?

To close, I ask that this Inquiry make representations to the Federal Government to the effect that:

- The regional radio industry has changed dramatically over the past few years due to networking by DMG.
- This change has seen a major reduction in the localism from those existing stations and has seen a reduction in the number of broadcasting staff employed at the existing stations.
- Other groups are willing and able to come into the market and are prepared to address these deficiencies.
- These other operators would welcome licence conditions relating to the amount of localism provided in their broadcasts.
- Why should the incumbents have their monopoly retained?
- What is the problem with free market competition as is the case in almost every other aspect of business life?

Perhaps a new form of commercial licence for regional areas could be contemplated – one that has stricter conditions regarding service provided, in return for a lower licence fee?

Something needs to be done to return localism to regional radio.

Thank you,

Steven Spink  
Wagga Wagga  
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